

# Political Position In Dramatic '56 Convention

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of articles on the life of Lawyer-General Albert Gallatin Jenkins, who lived at Greensboro, two miles south of the Coburn-Wasson County line, on the Ohio River. General Jenkins is buried in Spring Hill Cemetery in Huntington.)

By CONGRESSMAN  
KEN HECHLER

When Albert Gallatin Jenkins was chosen to be a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1856 at the age of only 25, this was a remarkable tribute for a man of his age. He was one of 15 delegates which the state of Virginia sent to the convention, and it was a very distinguished delegation.

Among former and active members of Congress who shared with Jenkins membership on the 1856 Virginia convention delegation were M.R.H. Garnett, Thomas S. Bocock, A. A. Chapman (later, like Jenkins a brigadier general in the Confederate Army), James A. Seddon (later Secretary of War of the Confederacy), Paulus Powell, Fayette McMullen (later Governor of Washington Territory), Richard Kidder Meade, and John B. Floyd (former Governor of Virginia, and later a Confederate general).

Young Jenkins caucused with the Virginia delegates at their headquarters in No. 12 Burnet House, Cincinnati, prior to going over to the convention floor at Smith & Nixon's Hall. The representatives of the Old Dominion decided to throw their weight behind James Buchanan of Pennsylvania.

"Buchanan is strong in the Virginia delegation," the Washington correspondent of the New York Herald reported on May 27, 1856, several days before the convention opened. "The opposition to him is split

sound advice for his fellow delegates as well. In fact, Jenkins and a few of his younger friends made such a good impression at the Cincinnati convention that the Cincinnati Daily Enquirer ran a special editorial on the Virginia delegation in its June 5, 1856 issue, which read in part as follows:

"The Old Dominion is worthily represented in the great national gathering of Democratic chiefs in our city. Her delegation consists chiefly of young men." (The latter observation was not entirely true, but only proved that Jenkins and his younger colleagues were recognized.)

The Cincinnati newspaper noted "an evident change in the character of Virginia's prominent men." This was explained in this way:

"The severer discipline and higher standard of scholarship, introduced chiefly through the influence of Jefferson in the establishment of the University of Virginia, has somewhat subdued the luxuriance of Virginia oratory, and infused into it a more cultivated, thoughtful and polished tone, with larger resources of science and knowledge. The younger class of Virginia politician enjoy advantages of education, study and learning which were not possessed by their predecessors. Mr. Jefferson was wont to deplore the passing of the rising young Virginians for extempore stump oratory, as calculated to weaken the habit of thought and study, and he never failed to urge upon the students at the University — whose interests occupied the study and labor of the last years of his illustrious life — the importance of cultivating a talent for writing composition or allowing larger

Jenkins's Virginia colleagues, Richard Kidder Meade, to place James Buchanan in nomination in perhaps the shortest presidential nominating speech in history:

"I am charged by my delegation with the duty of presenting to this convention as a candidate for the Presidency the name of that honest and ablest statesman, James Buchanan."

Without the usual (and highly artificial) hijinks which accompany most convention nominations, the convention proceeded to the business of balloting. The first ballot showed Buchanan with 135½; Pierce with 122½ and Douglas 33. Because the Democrats were operating at that time under the old two-thirds rule, which they did not abolish until 1896, to be nominated a candidate needed close to 200 votes. For ballot after ballot, the three candidates struggled on, locked in a desperate battle. Jenkins and the Virginia delegation stuck closely with Buchanan, who gained slowly.

Finally, Pierce, seeing that his cause has hopeless, threw his support to Douglas. The "Little Giant" gained until the 16th ballot when the score stood:

Buchanan — 168  
Douglas — 122  
Cass — 6

Douglas Withdraws

At this juncture, Douglas sent a dramatic message to the convention, stating: "I feel that an embittered state of feeling is being engendered in the convention which may endanger the harmony and success of our party. I wish you and all my friends to bear in mind that I have a thousand-fold more

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#### Landmark For Party

In a sense, 1856 was a great landmark for the Democratic Party; it was the first convention which they were holding west of the Allegheny Mountains, and it was the first year that the Republican Party was nominating a national candidate.

In the steaming convention halls, young Jenkins had a rare opportunity to get his political baptism of fire. His senior colleagues briefed him on the great nomination struggle about to ensue, but he soon proved by his adroitness and personality that he could secure information and

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occupied the study and labor of the last years of his illustrious life — the importance of cultivating a talent for writing composition, or allowing a larger scope for thoughts, and demanding a severer course of study and research."

#### Characterized Jenkins

One of the reasons I have quoted this editorial at such length is that it so well epitomized the approach of Albert Gallatin Jenkins, and characterized his own personal approach to scholarship as a necessary foundation for political debate and action. In fact, the editor seems to have had young Jenkins very much in mind when characterizing the newer form of Virginia politician.

Tension heightened at the convention as the hour approached for the presidential nominations. On Thursday afternoon, June 3, the Chair announced that "the order of the hour was the vote on the nomination for Presidency." It remained for one of

Albert Gallatin Jenkins returned from the Cincinnati convention armed with the political knowledge he had absorbed, and admired and respected as a rising political star of the Democratic Party. Unfortunately, neither Jenkins nor the American people recognized the vacillating character of Buchanan which was to make him one of our weakest Presidents during a time of great peril to the nation.

(To Be Continued)

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